

The musical theater program of the Freed Center for the Performing Arts will be performing their first musical of the 2023-24 academic year named “It Shoulda Been You” on September 28, 2023. The students and production staff have put in months of work leading up to this production that presented unique challenges of all kinds for the actors and producers alike.

The musical “It Shoulda Been You,” which originally ran on Broadway in 2015, was chosen as the first production of the 2023-24 season for several reasons. After some debate amongst the department heads over what content would be the most challenging and educational for the students of the musical theater program, the committee landed upon the aforementioned musical for a couple reasons.



The production staff is seen observing a test run of the musical. (Michael Gallagher / Northern Review)

“It Shoulda Been You” is first and foremost a story about family and religious differences. In a college environment of people with all different backgrounds, the staff thought it would be beneficial to give the students an opportunity to step into the shoes of characters experiencing these differences first hand. In addition, the committee believed the musical would be a catalyst for positive conversation across campus about such differences in a healthy way. “It has the opportunity to build bridges to other peoples across campus. And, this was one of those opportunities where we could do that” said David Coolidge, the director of the musical. One of the leaders of those conversations Coolidge has brought in has been Chaplain David MacDonald, a campus resource and expert in religious studies. In looking at the overall schedule and various themes of the productions to come, “It Shoulda Been You” is a deeply meaningful starting point.

Beyond educational opportunities for the students alone, the musical also presented logistical learning opportunities for the entire team involved. This musical production is taking place in the Stambaugh Studio Theater which is the smaller theater of the Freed Center. The structure is a four sided arena with different removable rows of seating. As such, the staff found it to be necessary to remove the back wall's seating to open the space for the actors and the set.

The set itself was a challenge for the stage crew because it not only had to be viewable from three different angles, but it also had to be reused for the direct next production occurring in the same theater. According to Coolidge "it was decided upon that we were going to for the most part use the same set for both productions. The set for Thanksgiving play will be tweaked slightly because the Thanksgiving play takes place in a public school. And this takes place in a fancy hotel...we found the commonalities in those two spaces, and he came up with a very compelling design for both productions." The set came together very close to when the actors themselves came into the theater to begin live runs of the show.



An aerial view of the three-quarters stage the musical takes place on. (Michael Gallagher / Northern Review)

The actors themselves even were chosen for their potential at gaining a learning experience. In a production such as this one, chemistry and role descriptions are key at making the characters work on the stage. Director Coolidge found many well fitting dynamics with the students such as Julie McConnell as the lead character Jenny, Pyper Sharkins as the bride Rebecca, Grant Bell as the groom Brian and Brady Griffin as the groom's father.



Bell discussed how he came to play the role of Brian as coming from his background and previous experiences. “I grew up in a Catholic school for a long time. So I have that kind of goody-two-shoes Catholic boy energy to me. So I think that might kind of add to a reason why I could have been cast in this role. It's also got some romantic elements and that's something I've done a lot in my past shows is like relationships and things like that on stage.”

Beyond that, Bell found one of the largest learning experiences was from understanding the content of the musical and discussions with the other cast members. “We did a lot of just sit down and converse as a group about how we feel about certain lines, certain situations...there's not a very large Jewish population at ONU. So getting that kind of perspective from some outsiders as well as some insiders was really helpful to understand the piece better.”

“It Shoulda Been You” is a heartfelt musical about family, religious differences, and personal growth. From the beginning of production to the premier of the musical on September 28, 2023 the cast and crew have triumphed through all the challenges that came with a story of this complexity.



The stage manager is seen reading through the lighting queues before the final practice run of the musical. (Michael Gallagher / Northern Review)